

## Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga Interviews Jessica Kairé

**RMZ:** I understand that Guatemala has a long history of violence due to CIA interventions in the 1950s to guerrilla warfare in the 1970s and 80s, and from the genocide committed by Efraín Ríos Montt and current-day street gang warfare. Was there a particular event or moment of violence that inspired *CONFORT* Series?

**JK:** Years ago I was partying with a couple of friends and at some point we got in the car to drive back home. We were pretty wasted and suddenly found ourselves in El Gallito, a barricaded neighborhood in Guatemala City that's controlled by drug traffickers. Next thing you know, two armed men drove up besides us and tried to block our way. I'm not sure what they were carrying but it looked like M14 rifles. Long story short, we became involved in this random car chase and shooting until we finally, and fortunately, lost them. I'm telling you this story because it reveals how fragile life can be in a place like Guatemala.

When I made the first set of *CONFORT* sculptures, it was really in direct response to these kinds of encounters that we can experience on a daily basis and how we are so used to it. But with some distance, I've also realized that it was through this work that I began to unpack and articulate a set of personal experiences that are directly connected to those larger historical events, like the kidnapping of people who were close to me and others leaving the country in the early 80s, and the stress that came along with it.

**RMZ:** The color of one of the grenades reminds me of tropical fruits - bright, yellow, orange, violet, green, whereas other weapons are in pastel colors... How did you choose the color palette for the various sculptures and do the colors carry symbolic meanings?

**JK:** Playfulness and humor are elements I often like to use because I see them as good entry points to more dense subject-matter, so switching the weapon's typical black, brown and deep green palette for bright colors made sense. The Tropical Grenade's colors (yellow, orange, green and pink), which you mention, came out of a chat with El Museo's curators in which I remember Elvis Fuentes proposing that the grenade resemble a mango and I liked that idea because it suggested a kind of violence gluttony.

**RMZ:** Are viewers sometimes able to hold the *CONFORT* Weapons when on display?

**JK:** Usually, the work is displayed behind glass and isn't interactive but it really depends. I once displayed a dozen grenades without glass and at least 3 of them got stolen. On another occasion, for an exhibition titled *Horror Vacui / The Disappeared*, I created a series of eight soft bodies that visitors could wear as they travelled throughout the space, an extension of the *CONFORT* series. The eventual wear and tear of the pieces was valuable to me. It gave the work its own history and also offered a more visceral experience for the visitors.

**RMZ:** The egg-like shape and architecture of El Nuevo Museo de Arte Contemporáneo – NuMu in Guatemala reminds of the *CONFORT* Series. Is there an aesthetic link between these projects?

**JK:** To some extent, I'd say this is purely coincidental. But I do think that there's an underlying link between the two, given that they were both created within the same context and respond to larger issues of underdevelopment and precariousness. NuMu's oval-shaped architecture was built and tailored to house an egg-selling business, but I think its aesthetics are common in our country and probably result precisely from the lack of resources. And this same shortage ranges from employment to educational resources, which in turn brings forth organized crime and violence.

**RMZ:** Can you describe the development of NuMu... How you went about acquiring the space and gathering the funds to build the museum? Were there difficulties or barriers in establishing the museum?

**JK:** For several years, Stefan Benchoam and I talked about the need to create a museum that would support, exhibit and document contemporary art within the country, but we couldn't quite resolve it. Then in 2012, Stefan called me up saying that he'd found a space for rent. Turns out it was this iconic 2 x 2.5 meter high oval-shaped structure that we'd both known about since we were kids – we rented it out the next day. By July, we had developed a yearly program that resembled that of other leading museums and organized a fundraiser. We inaugurated the space with a pictorial intervention by Costa Rican artist Federico Herrero and since then, NuMu has presented projects by diverse artists and curators, which have brought about cultural exchange, the opportunity for artists to realize unique projects and a growing relationship between NuMu and its neighboring community.

It's almost perverse to think that the same limitations due to which no contemporary art museum has existed in the country prior to NuMu

(and under which a modern art museum barely survives) are the same that have created a unique situation for us to question and re-define what a contemporary art museum can be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Artists have little to no institutional support in Guatemala and every four years a new government sets in which interrupts any cultural advances being made. So we basically have to build things from scratch. Within NuMu, our challenges have mostly gravitated around funding and time constraints. We've invested from our own pockets and the exhibition production is usually split between Stefan supporting artists on-site while I outsource digital and printed materials from New York. But at the same time, we've been very fortunate to receive the ongoing financial and emotional support from Friends of NuMu, a group of people who recognize the need for the Museum, and who genuinely supports its mission.

**RMZ:** In much of your work, there is a desire for the work to interact directly with the viewer. Is there an underlying mission in your practice to have the work effected by the viewer?

**JK:** There are exceptions, but in general there is that intention in my practice. I'm always very interested in sculpture and this medium easily lends itself to interaction, given that much of our experiences as human beings become evident through our relationship with objects. On a more personal note, I would say that this intention comes from my personal background of being raised in a traditional Jewish home which often meant sitting around the table to share a meal with my family and in contrast experiencing hostility in the Guatemalan urban landscape. Having had this kind of twofold experience has increasingly gotten me interested in creating platforms where food and dialogue can meet.

**RMZ:** To me the general concepts of “relational aesthetics” - of creating a situation of shared experience functions perfectly and is elemental to Latin American culture. I am wondering if you feel similarly or have observations or thoughts regarding relational aesthetics embedded in Guatemalan culture and way of life?

**JK:** Culturally speaking, I think that there are connecting points between the different Latin American countries, but each is also very peculiar. Within the context I grew up in Guatemala City, the need for privacy and intimacy prevailed. Of course, this is coming from very personal circumstances but there's definitely a lack of conviviality among the culturally diverse communities in the country. So there's a huge need to generate spaces for shared experience and to respectfully celebrate this diversity, I think this is where art can become less of a commodity and more of a mediating resource. And I'd say nowadays there are more

efforts being made amongst the local arts community to promote collaboration, but things don't happen over night.

This interview is part of *Crossfire*, a project conceived and edited by Nicolás Dumit Estévez for El Museo del Barrio.